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Message Text

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ACTION AF-10

INFO OCT-01 ARA-10 EUR-12 NEA-10 ISO-00 CIAE-00
DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05
PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 ICA-11 IO-13 /109 W
----------064177 090407Z /12
R 080753Z JUL 78
FM AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7752
INFO AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
AMEMBASSY NAIROBI
RUQMNS AMEMBASSY SANA 383
USINT BAGHDAD
USINT HAVANA
USCINCEUR VAIHINGEN GER

C O N F I D E N T I A L KHARTOUM 3007

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, ET
SUBJ: MILITARY SITUATION IN ERITREA

SUMMARY: ETHIOPIANS APPEAR TO HAVE RECAPTURED ERITREAN TOWN OF OM HAGER NEAR SUDANESE BORDER AND HAVE MADE ATTEMPTS TO ENLARGE DEFENSIVE PERIMETER AROUND ASMARA. FORMER COOPERATION BETWEEN ERITREAN PEOPLE'S LIBERATION FRONT (EPLF) AND ETHIOPIAN PEOPLE'S REVOLUTIONARY PARTY (EPRP) SEEMS TO HAVE BROKEN DOWN. ETHIOPIAN PREPARATIONS FOR MAJOR OFFENSIVE IN ERITREA APPEAR TO BE CONTINUING, WITH ERITREAN EXPECTATION THAT MAJOR OFFENSIVE WILL NOT OCCUR BEFORE SEPT/OCT. POLITICAL AGREEMENT BETWEEN EPLF AND ERITREAN LIBERATION FRONT (ELF) IS STILL NOT POS-
SIBLE IN NEAR TERM AND WILL PROBABLY PRECLUDE ANY MAJOR
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ERITREAN ASSAULT ON ASMARA. MILITARY SITUATION DOES NOT APPEAR TO HAVE IMPROVED APPRECIABLY FOR EITHER SIDE.
END SUMMARY

1. EMBOFF MET WITH WESTERN JOURNALIST WHO HAS EXTENSIVE CONTACTS AMONG ERITREAN SECESSIONIST GROUPS, HAS VISITED ERITREA FOR EXTENDED PERIODS AND HAS REPORTED GENERALLY

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ACCURATELY IN PAST. JOURNALIST STATED THAT ELF HAS ACKNOWLEDGED THAT ETHIOPIAN FORCES HAVE BEEN ABLE TO CROSS TEKAZZE RIVER SUCCESSFULLY FROM HUMERA TO OM HAGER NEAR SUDANESE BORDER. HOWEVER, ELF IS COUNTERATTACKING ETHIOPIAN POSITIONS, FORCING RESUPPLY BY HELICOPTER. JOURNALIST BELIEVED ETHIOPIANS MIGHT BE ABLE TO HOLD RECAPTURED OM HAGER.

2. CORRESPONDENT WAS TOLD BY EPLF SOURCES THAT ETHIOPIAN TROOPS HAD MADE INITIALLY SUCCESSFUL THRUST NORTHEAST OF ASMARA ON JULY 4 AND 5. ETHIOPIANS WERE ABLE TO RECAPTURE TOWN OF BELEZZA, WHERE CRITICAL WATER AND ELECTRIC SUPPLY SYSTEMS FOR ASMARA ARE LOCATED. HOWEVER, EPLF WAS ABLE TO COUNTERATTACK, RECAPTURE BELEZZA AND DRIVE ETHIOPIAN TROOPS NEARLY BACK INTO ASMARA PROPER. ACCORDING TO EPLF SOURCES, EPLF IS NOW HOLDING ADI NEFAS (3 KM FROM ASMARA) AND THE FORTIFIED ENTRENCHMENTS NORTHEAST OF ASMARA FORMERLY HELD BY ETHIOPIAN FORCES. (PREVIOUSLY ETHIOPIAN PUSHES FROM ASMARA HAD BEEN AGAINST ELF POSITIONS ONLY, TO THE WEST, NORTHWEST AND SOUTH.) CORRESPONDENT BELIEVED THAT ERITREAN GUERRILLAS WERE NOT PREPARED TO LAUNCH ALL-OUT ASSAULT ON ASMARA NOR WOULD THEY THREATEN SERIOUSLY AIRFIELD (YOHANNES IV) UNTIL MAJOR ASSAULT COULD BE MOUNTED.

3. ERITREAN SOURCES BELIEVE THAT ETHIOPIANS ARE MOVING MAJOR FORCE FROM ENDA SELASSIE (NW TIGRE REGION) INTO ERITREA, POSSIBLY WITH OBJECTIVE OF RELIEVING GARRISON AT CONFIDENTIAL

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BARENTU. FORCE WOULD BE TRAVELLING THROUGH RELATIVELY NON-HOSTILE TERRITORY INHABITED BY KUNAMA ETHNIC MINORITY, WHICH TRADITIONALLY HAS BEEN HOSTILE TO ERITREAN QUERRILLAS.

4. GOVERNMENT OF SUDAN (GOS) HAS CLOSED LAST OFFICE OF ETHIOPIAN DEMOCRATIC UNION (EDU) IN SUDAN AND NO LONGER PROVIDES SUPPORT TO THEIR CAUSE. JOURNALIST HAS HEARD RUMOR THAT EDU MILITARY COMMANDER, GEN. NEGA TEGENGE WAS NOW IN GONDAR REGION WITH FORCE OF 500-600 MEN, BUT HAD NO INFORMATION ABOUT HIS ACTIVITIES.

5. GOS HAS ALSO STOPPED ALLOWING EPRP MEMBERS TO ENTER SUDAN. JOURNALIST HAD BEEN TOLD BY EPLF SOURCE THAT FORMER COOPERATION WITH EPRP NO LONGER EXISTED AND THAT IDEOLOGICAL ALLIANCE HAD BROKEN DOWN. EPLF REPORTEDLY BELIEVES THAT EPRP SQUANDERED ITS OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD A VIABLE OPPOSITION TO DIRG SOME 2-3 YEARS AGO AND HAD NOW DETERIORATED INTO "TEXTBOOK" MARXIST-LENINISTS WITH NO PRACTICAL FIELD EXPERIENCE. IN FACT, ELF CLAIMS TO HOLDING 500 EPRP "PRISONERS" INSIDE ERITREA WHO HAD BEEN DRIVEN OUT OF TIGRE REGION RECENTLY BY THE TIGRE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION FRONT (TPLF) AND SUBSEQUENTLY DISARMED.

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7. ERITREANS EXPECT ETHIOPIANS TO CONTINUE SMALL OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS, SUCH AS AT OM HAGER AND AROUND ASMARA, THROUGHOUT RAINY SEASON, BUT DO NOT EXPECT MAJOR OFFENSIVE UNTIL AFTER RAINS IN SEPT/OCT. THERE STILL HAS NOT BEEN A POLITICAL AGREEMENT BETWEEN EPLF AND ELF AND THIS IS ONE REASON WHY MAJOR GUERRILLA ASSAULT ON ASMARA IS NOT IMMINENT. WHILE THERE HAVE BEEN SOME MILITARY CONFRONTATIONS IN ERITREA, THERE DO NOT APPEAR TO HAVE BEENANY SIGNIFICANT STRATEGIC CHANGES.
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Disposition Approved on Date:
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